



U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg speaks with area residents during a meeting Tuesday in Libby.

Rehberg hears residents' concerns

By BRENT SHRUM
Western News Reporter

Congressman Denny Rehberg heard concerns ranging from highway construction to asbestos cleanup and broadband telecommunications access during a public meeting Tuesday evening in the Ponderosa Room at Libby City Hall.

Rehberg said he was in town as part of his policy to visit all 56 of Montana's counties to hear about issues important to his constituents. After a brief introduction, he opened the meeting to questions from the audience.

Mayor Tony Berget asked Rehberg to do what he can to put some pressure on the state to rebuild the Swamp Creek section of U.S. Highway 2. Rehberg said he would be happy to do so and pointed out that during his ride into Libby he noticed the decrepit condition of survey tags put in place for the much-delayed project.

"They're getting so old they're starting to fall apart and fade," he said.

Les Skramstad discussed the poor local economy and said there's no chance of

recovery until the Superfund cleanup of asbestos-contaminated vermiculite is completed. Skramstad expressed dismay that Environmental Protection Agency head Mike Leavitt won't be spending more time here during his promised visit next month.

Rehberg said there's no guarantee that the current administration will still be in power next year and told Skramstad that people should focus on the positive aspects of Leavitt's visit.

"Let's take advantage of the opportunity of having him here and make it as meaningful for him as possible," he said.

Gordon Sullivan, technical adviser for the Libby Area Technical Assistance Group – an organization funded by an EPA grant to help interpret documents and decisions related to the cleanup – told Rehberg more money is needed for research to support EPA activities in Libby.

"We need some research to back up what decisions we can make and what decisions we can go into the future with," he said.

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Rehberg said he would be happy to work with state EPA director John Wardell to find out how he can help. Wardell was present in the Ponderosa Room to attend a meeting on TAG issues following Rehberg's forum.

Lincoln County Commissioner Rita Windom told Rehberg that she would like the EPA to be able to buy

some residents out of their homes when cleanup costs exceed the property's value, "but the regulatory powers won't allow the EPA to do that."

Asked about the issue by Rehberg, Wardell said the agency did buy some homes during a cleanup in Anaconda in 1985. He said he doesn't know that there is a prohibition on the practice, but cost-effectiveness issues can be a difficult hurdle to overcome.

Berget asked Rehberg to do what he can to help bring up-to-date broadband telecommunications to the Libby area. Rehberg encouraged supporters of the proposal to work with Sen. Conrad Burns. No one in Congress knows more about telecommunications than Burns, Rehberg said.

that a large state with a small population gets the necessary services.

Asked by Lincoln County Commissioner John Konzen about the possibility of economic benefits from the Healthy Forests Initiative which encourages thinning of forests to reduce fire danger, Rehberg said resource industry supporters are learning to employ tactics used by "extreme environmentalists."

The environmentalists have made gains through "incrementalism," getting a little bit at a time until they get everything they want, Rehberg said. He said that although the Healthy Forests bill was watered down before it passed, "we got our foot in the door; we got our nose under the tent flap."